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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the prophetic speech of Ga spirit mediums in terms of its linguistic style and its socio-religious function. As used in the study, "prophetic speech" is understood to have two major characteristics: (1) glossolalic style, and (2) prophetic message content, and it is used by people believed to be possessed by spirits. Prophetic speech in Ga society is discussed in terms of the socio-religious context in which it occurs (including Ga beliefs about spirit possession and the role of the Ga spirit medium), spirit mediums in practice, the socio-verbal interaction in a seance, and the linguistic characteristics of prophetic speech. The socio-religious functions of prophetic speech include social control, socialization, and fulfilling a need for participation in religious activities. (CLK)

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PROPHETIC SPEECH IN GA SPIRIT MEDIUMSHIP

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PROPHETIC SPEECH IN GA SPIRIT MEDIUMSHIP

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I Introduction

This paper will analyze the prophetic speech of Ga spirit mediums in terms of its linguistic style and its socio-religious function. As used here "prophetic speech" is understood to have two major characteristics: (1) glossolalic style and (2) prophetic message content. As the following analysis will show, prophetic speech displays many of the features which have commonly been discussed under the rubric of glossolalia (Lombard 1910; Cutter 1927; May 1956) and, like glossalalia, is used by people believed to be possessed by spirits.

Recent studies (Wolfram 1966; Samarin 1968; Goodman 1968) have agreed, albeit for somewhat different reasons, that glossalalia is non-linguistic; and at least one writer has suggested that the phenomenon might be best analyzed in terms of rhythmic rather than linguistic principles (Goodman 1968:6-7). The prophetic speech of Ga mediums includes many nonlinguistic utterances and there is some indication that it operates within rhythmic rules. But, unlike glossalalia, it contains at its core a prophetic message which is expressed in a known language. In its essentials, the meaning of this message is evident to all listeners. The entire religious performance in which prophetic speech occurs is in fact centered around the deliverance of this message.

II The Socio-Religious Context

To understand the significance of prophetic speech in Ga society a brief discussion is necessary of (1) Ga beliefs about spirit possession and (2) the role of the Ga spirit medium.

1. Spirit Possession. The Ga believe that certain states of dissociation are caused by the entrance of a spirit into a human body. The actions and speech of the possessed are believed to be those of the embodied spirit. The possessed person claims to have no memory of the period of possession and is not held accountable for any of her[1] actions.

While Ga distinguish among a number of different types of spirit agents capable of possessing people, this discussion need consider only the most socially and religiously significant of these: the traditional gods. These gods, called wɔdzi (sing., wɔŋ), are conceived in largely anthropomorphic terms and, unlike the high God, are intimately concerned with the everyday lives of the Ga. Most Ga ideas of causality are ultimately traceable to the actions of these gods.

It is believed that an individual wɔŋ, in order (a) to show his love for a particular person and (b) to establish a means of direct communication with his congregation of worshippers (or perhaps to attract such a congregation), will enter into a chosen person, thus inducing a state of possession-trance. For a woman to fall possessed by a wɔŋ is usually an indication that she has been chosen as a wife by the god. In this case it is expected that she will have the proper rites conducted which will enable her to perform as the god's medium.

(2) Spirit Mediumship. Not every possessed person can be used as a mouthpiece by her possessing agent. The ability to serve as a spirit medium is restricted to those who have entered a permanent relationship with a given wɔŋ (a relationship which is viewed as a form of marriage) and who have undertaken a period of instruction. The process by which an individual becomes a recognized spirit medium is long and arduous, usually necessitating from two to six years of training and ascetic living.

At the outset of an initiate's period of training a series of rites are performed which ritually sever her pre-existing social ties and begin the

1. While there are a number of male mediums, the vast majority (c. 95%) are female.

process of creating a new social identity for her. The most crucial of the initiation rites is that of naaŋa (lit., 'mouth squeeze'), in which medicines are administered to the initiate which allow her god familiar to speak through her and announce his identity. Prior to this time no utterances have been made during occasions of possession. The proper performance of this rite is heavily stressed. If the spirit does not speak and identify himself, it is believed that (a) the woman's trance states have been caused by sorcery, (b) her possession is fradulent or (c) the initiate has in some way offended the god and provoked his anger. In any of these cases the would-be initiate is not expected to live, and will not be trained as a spirit medium.

With the successful performance of naaŋa the possession seizures of the initiate assume (potentially at least) a socially useful function; she may now serve as the mouthpiece of her god and convey much sought after messages from the spirit world. While her full assumption of the status of trained spirit medium must await the completion of training, the initiate who has undergone naaŋa is recognized as a worthy vessel for her deity.

In the course of training an initiate learns numerous aspects of the role which she will be expected to perform as a spirit medium. While these cover a wide range of skills, her ability to speak with the voice of her god is the most essential of her skills. In view of the fact that the proper functioning of Ga society and the prosperity of individuals is believed to be largely controlled by the traditional gods, the great value placed on proper communication with them can be easily appreciated. The institution of spirit mediumship provides the major means of communication with these gods and the only means by which all members of the society may directly participate.

III Spirit Mediums in Practice

There are two distinct contexts in which possessed mediums perform: (1) public festivals and funerals and (2) private seances. This paper will be concerned only with the second context. While the prophetic style of speech

is essentially similar in both settings, the private seance is more amenable to analysis and, increasingly, is the more common context of its performance.

Although there are a number of cult variations with respect to the manner in which a seance is conducted by Ga mediums, the essential pattern of the performance appears to be the same among the four major Ga cults: kpele, me, akɔŋ, and ootu. The variations need not concern us here.

A seance is usually held either in the early morning or the late afternoon. Each medium has a particular day, sometimes two, of each week on which it is tabooed to invoke her god; there is also a period of five weeks in each year during which there is a general moratorium on seances for all mediums. There is, of course, a great degree of individual variation among mediums with respect to the number of clients whom they serve. Some mediums are prosperous and will be visited by clients nearly every "working day"; others may perform only a few times each year. Mediums are usually most active just before and just following the annual rites of planting and harvesting.

Prior to a seance, groups of clients arrive and sit waiting in the courtyard of the medium's compound. A person who wishes to approach the spirits is always accompanied by at least one companion who is chosen for his verbal skills and his social adroitness. The companion serves both as a supporter of and a spokesman for the afflicted. When the afflicted is a younger person he will commonly be accompanied by one or more older relatives who similarly serve as spokesmen and supporters. A group of clients wait until the medium indicates that she is ready to begin the seance and invites them into her room.

The seance itself takes place in the medium's living quarters. In the urban areas this consists most often of a separate room in a large compound. With all but the wealthiest mediums (and these are few) the room contains all of the medium's personal belongings. In most cases it is her bedroom and is not usually partitioned. It is usually small and dimly lit, for it is used for little other than sleeping and receiving clients.

In a corner of her room each medium has a small shrine for her god. The shrine consists of a two- or three-tiered altar with numerous sacred objects placed on each tier. This altar is invariably concealed behind a curtain. In front of the altar is a wooden stool resting on a goat skin. When the medium is prepared to begin the seance she sits on this stool facing the altar, her back to her clients.

In conducting a seance the medium is accompanied by an assistant called the naadzielɔ (lit., 'the one who takes from the mouth'). This person is usually a close relative of the medium and is commonly an older person, well versed in traditional religion.

While the clients and the assistant sit in the medium's room informally conversing with each other, the medium, seated on her stool facing away from her clients, pours a brief libation to her god. She then begins ringing a small (3") bell at constant frequency. The medium sits thus ringing her bell until the spirit descends and possesses her, usually from two to ten minutes after the outset of ringing.

The format of a given seance will depend upon the nature of the problem which the clients bring. If the afflicted has been consistently plagued by misfortune, but has no clear suspicion as to its cause, he may simply wish to consult the god for a general diagnosis of his troubles. In this case the medium invokes her god familiar, and the spokesman for the afflicted presents the problem. A series of questions are posed by the god, who then provides an explanation of the malady and prescribes a method of treatment or a course of action.

Alternatively, the client may wish to speak with spirits other than the medium's god. In this case the medium similarly invokes her god (for this is the only spirit agent which she can summon directly); he is informed of the problem by the client's spokesman and a request is made for him to call the appropriate spirits from the spirit world. When the indicated spirits arrive they enter, one by one, into the body of the medium

and converse with the clients. When they have finished their testimony they depart and the medium's own god returns. He gives a few parting words and then he also leaves. The medium becomes unpossessed and the seance is over.

IV Socio-Verbal Interaction in the Seance

Prior to the invocation itself there is usually a minimal amount of conversation between the medium and her clients. To the extent that conversation does take place between the two parties it is very informal gossip and "small talk" such as is common to most exchanges among peers. The medium is greeted by her clients in much the same manner as any other adult would be greeted; the rules of social and verbal etiquette common to ordinary social encounters are employed. Ga society is essentially classless and in keeping with this there are few morphologic indicators of status relationships. The status of the medium, such as it is, is indicated only by the somewhat honorific appelation aawɔŋ, which is used as a term of address for spirit mediums only, and which appears to be optional. Clients familiar with the medium simply greet her by her common name.

The medium is not told of the reason why the clients wish to have the god invoked, nor are the details of the particular case discussed in any way prior to the seance itself. This is entirely in keeping with the rather complete distinction which is maintained between the medium as a person and the medium as a mouthpiece for spirits. The clients have come to converse with spirits and the particulars of their case do not concern the medium as a person at all. As the medium begins the process of invoking her god, informal conversation among the clients and between the clients and the assistant continues.

Once the god has descended and taken possession of the medium, a marked change takes place in the speech of all present. While the change is of course most dramatic on the part of the medium, a striking

transformation also takes place in the speech of the clients. In contrast with the pre-possession setting, the seance becomes a status-marked situation (Ervin-Tripp 1967:6). A formal structure is imposed upon the social group. On the part of the clients this is indicated by (1) alteration in the message form used in speaking to the medium: requests to the possessed medium are made in a humble and beseeching manner and care is taken to use polite circumlocutions; (2) change in topic of conversation: the purpose of the clients' visit is explained in detail and (3) emergence of a formal leadership role: a preselected individual becomes the spokesman for the clients.

V Prophetic Speech

Whereas the "switching" which occurs in the speech of the clients is largely confined to the realms of message form and topic, the transformation in the speech of the medium covers nearly the entire range of her vocal output.

The onset of the medium's possession-trance is indicated by quick bursts of guttural groans.[2] These are of short duration, lasting not more than 20 seconds in all, and serve as the markers of sacred language: all that follows is the speech of spirits. The possessed medium will then sing the verses of a song or two and the clients will join in the chorus. These songs are identified with the god which has possessed the medium and are sung in the god's language. As most Ga mediums are possessed by Twi or Fanti speaking gods, the songs and speech which follow are in an Akan dialect. Thus, the switching in the medium's speech includes a change in language or dialect. When, in the course of a seance, other spirits are summoned to testify or contribute in any way they will speak in their own dialects.[3] The most dramatic markers of prophetic speech

2. These are similar to what Lombard (1910:25-28) has called phonations frustes.

3. A possessed Ga medium will in fact rarely speak anything other than Ga, Twi or Fanti.

are not, however, the possessed medium's switches in language or dialect. The alternative dialects simply provide interchangeable backgrounds, as it were, against which the prophetic speech style is displayed.

The outstanding characteristics of prophetic speech, all of which represent deviations from standard speech, can, I believe, be analyzed into the following categories:

(1) Pitch. (a) There is a suddenly rising, extremely high pitch at the ends of many words and phrases which is totally absent from standard speech (see lines 2, 7, 9 and 16 of Appendix).[4] (b) The overall pitch of the medium's voice, however, drops considerably from its normal level.

(2) Volume. There is (a) a relative increase in the volume of some syllables and (b) an overall increase in the volume of the medium's speech.

(3) Vowel Elongation. There is often an extreme elongation of vowels in the final positions of words (see lines 11, 16, and 23 of Appendix).

(4) Glottalization. Many words and phrases begin and/or end with abnormal glottal constriction (see lines 2, 23, 24 and 25 of Appendix).

(5) Hyperventilation. Audible hyperventilation, often voiced, preceeds many phrases (see lines 4, 5, 7 and 9 of Appendix).

(6) Repetition. Single words and entire phrases are often repeated two or three times (see lines 4, 5; 12, 13, 14; 18, 19, 20 of Appendix).

(7) Interjection of Non-Linguistic Sounds. Extraneous sounds not employed in standard speech frequently intervene between phrases (see lines 32 and 33 of Appendix).

(8) Changes in Syntax. Words and phrases are at times introduced into an utterance in syntactically unusual positions (see line 39 of Appendix).

(9) Rhythm. There appears to be an overall rhythmic relationship among speech segments. A rhythmic effect seems to result from an interaction among several factors, which include at least the following:

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4. References are to an appended section of transcribed prophetic speech in Ga.

(a) delivery of speech in bursts (with usually no more than five words to a burst) and pauses between bursts (either within or at the ends of phrases);

(b) hyperventilation, sudden volume increase, and/or glottalization in initial positions of speech segments, causing the beginnings of bursts to be explosive;

(c) glottalized final stops or other sudden cutoff points at the ends of bursts.

Lowered voice tone (1b) and increased volume (2b) are apparently consistent with the fact that the female medium is possessed by a male god and is thus imitating male voice quality. These two characteristics appear to change somewhat, depending upon the identity of the spirit possessing the medium. They should not, in themselves, be considered characteristics of prophetic speech.[5] With these two qualifications, the characteristics noted above could serve as a tentative outline of prophetic speech style among the Ga.

It should be noted that most of the distortions of prophetic speech are extrinsic to the core words of the message itself and are not allowed to obscure the content of the medium's speech. The dramatic, high-rising pitch (1a), for example, occurs at the ends of words and is given to non-morphemic vowel sounds which have been added to the words. The interjection of non-linguistic sounds (7) occurs between phrases and does not interrupt utterances or obscure their meaning. The voiced hyperventilation (5) preceeds many phrases but is not usually found in the core of a phrase. In cases where syntax is altered to create unusual constructions (8), the distorted phrase is usually followed by a repetition in standard syntax.

That there is no great distortion in the core of the message is in keeping with one of the major purposes of prophetic speech, namely the communication of coherent instructions and advice from the possessed

5. It is, however, true that the overwhelming number of mediums are female and that the greatest number of possessing spirits are male. This particular distortion in voice quality is, then, very frequent.

medium to her clients. It is in fact this function which most distinguishes prophetic speech from classic forms of glossalalia. For glossalalia "communicates" only the fact of a person's possession by spirits; in itself it contains no coherent message content.

In view of Goodman's recent study in which she describes a characteristic rhythmic and tonal pattern for glossalalic speech, one of the more interesting characteristics of what I have called prophetic speech in the Ga setting is its overall rhythmic quality. Unfortunately, I am unable to define this quality in a precise manner and cannot demonstrate a clear pattern for it. What emerges from listening to the performance of Ga prophetic speech is an impression of deeply imbedded rhythm produced through patterned pauses, hyperventilations, volume changes, glottalizations and other non-standard speech behavior. That prophetic speech should display a rhythmic quality is not, however, surprising, for there are a number of overtly musical aspects to the seance. The most outstanding of these are the ringing of bells before and during possession and the singing which accompanies the arrival of spirits. Moreover, the motor activities of the possessed medium include rhythmic swaying to and fro while delivering prophetic speech.

It does not appear that prophetic speech can be viewed simply as a product of the deep trance state, as Goodman has suggested in her study of glossolalia. In all cases I have observed, it has been highly doubtful that the medium has been in anything approaching deep trance during the performance of a seance. That mediums do on occasion enter into deep trance is unquestionable, but it appears that this is most often done in public performance, in the midst of much drumming and general excitement. It seems that the psycho-physiological factors which effect the verbal activities of those in a state of dissociation are only marginally operative in the performance of mediums during a seance. In short, I suspect that most mediums indulge in a good amount of play-acting in their private

practices. On the other hand, it seems that some level of trance is probably attained in seance and that some of the characteristics of prophetic speech (e.g., hyperventilation) are related to this.

VI Socio-Religion Functions of Prophetic Speech

A Ga spirit medium's use of the prophetic speech style outlined above validates her role as a mouthpiece for supernatural beings. Her use of prophetic speech as a sacred message form gives her utterances a measure of authority which she could not achieve by using standard message forms and allows her to provide (1) a mechanism of social control, (2) a vehicle of socialization and (3) a context for religious participation.

(1) Social Control. In cases brought to a medium there is usually an element of misconduct, alledged misconduct or an expressed need for advice on correct conduct on the part of the client. For illness and misfortune are generally believed to be the result of wrongdoing. Even when the primary cause of misfortune may be attributed to sorcery, it is often pointed out that sorcery is not effective if the intended victim has been entirely upright in his ways. Thus, in his conversation with the possessed medium, the client will often be severely chastized and upbraided for known transgressions. Also, the possessed medium may abuse the client unmercifully for negligence in the performance of ritual observances. In this way the medium serves as a guardian or orthodox values and as a voice for the traditional community's sentiments. She is able to fill this role because her prophetic utterances are, in a Malinowskian sense, given a "charter" by the religious belief that chastisement and abuse are coming not from the medium as a person but from the spirits which possess her.

In a functional sense the medium serves in a role similar to that of the joking partner found in many societies. For the possessed medium, like the joking partner, stands in a privileged relationship to the transgressor of social norms: she can abuse people without fear of retribution

and without causing interpersonal or intrasocietal conflict. Potential strain among people in the society is in part relieved by placing the responsibility for reproach on spirits whose dictates cannot easily be disregarded and for whose abuse one cannot retaliate.

(2) Socialization. By instructing her clients in the proper conduct of social relations and in stressing the importance of ritual obligations, the possessed medium provides ongoing socialization for members of the society. In almost all matters, the medium holds the traditional moral values and thus teaches her clients their culture. She also teaches her clients the ways of the gods and the rituals appropriate to them. They learn the songs associated with each of the gods and are instructed in the correct manner of approaching the gods.

(3) Religious Participation. In the context of the seance the medium's clients are able to deal directly with the otherwise impenetrable forces which shape their lives. By speaking with the gods, clients can both fulfill obligations of respect to them and engage them in meaningful discourse. Clients can make direct requests to the gods and can, on occasion, negotiate with them in matters of great concern to the client's lives. Further, it could be argued that by communicating directly with the supernatural, clients are given a sense of control over their world.

APPENDIX

The following sample of prophetic speech was transcribed from a tape made during a seance performed by a Ga spirit medium in Accra. The few pages which have been transcribed represent only a small fraction of the total speech in the seance. In these few lines, however, most of the outstanding features of Ga prophetic speech are displayed.

The proceedings of the seance from which this corpus was taken can be briefly outlined as follows: The parents of infant twins[6] visited a medium for the purpose of having the twins' spirits invoked. The medium invoked her god who was informed of the clients' request. The twins' spirits were summoned by the god and arrived individually, one after the other. They were questioned by their parents about the manner in which the upcoming twins' feast should be conducted, and blessings were asked from them.

The transcription begins with the arrival of the first of the two twins, Oko.

The particular section which has been transcribed is somewhat atypical in that the role of the assistant (who usually serves as a go-between in conversation between clients and medium) is circumvented: the clients speak directly to the possessed medium without their speech passing through an intermediary.

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6. The Ga consider twins to be sacred beings. Each year there is a twins' festival during which the twins are given a ritual meal. Each year, just prior to the festival, the parents of twins are expected to visit a spirit medium to discover what food the twins should be fed at their festival.

KEY: The following symbols are used in the transcription:

˜ = heavy, sudden impulsion or expulsion of breath, sometimes voiced; often difficult to distinguish from heavily aspirated "h", and frequently transcribed together with an "h" (h̃) for this reason.

↑ = extremely high, suddenly rising pitch

´ = high pitch

` = low pitch

– = mid pitch

+ = outstanding juncture or pause: larger
(a) than other junctures or pauses in immediate environment or
(b) than the juncture or pause which would normally occur in such an environment

ˀ = marked glottal constriction not normally occuring in similar environments

--- = interruption or drowning out of speech

[--] = portion of speech unclear

Q_n = speech of client$_n$

M = speech of medium

line	speaker	utterance
1.	Q_1	ààtá òkó + hɛ́ní òdzɛ́ɛ̀ɛ̀
		sir oko how are things at your place?
2.	M	ʔɛ̄ blɛ̄ōōōɛ̄↑?
		all is well
3.	Q_1	dzɛ̄ɛ̄ bìì
		how are the people there?
4.	M	ȟɛ̄ kō édzɔ̀
		the forest is peaceful
5.		ȟɛ̄ kō édzɔ̀
		the forest is peaceful
6.	Q_2	atā okó hénī òdzè
		sir oko how are things at your place?
7.	M	ȟɛ̄ blɛ̄ōō ē↑
		all is well
8.	Q_2	dzɛ̄ɛ̄ bìì
		how are the people there?
9.	M	ȟā kō ēdzɔ̄ɔ̄ ē↑
		the forest is peaceful

10. Q_3 ńtšɛ̀ hɛ́nì ɔ̀dzɛ̀ é---
my father, how are things at your place?

11. M blɛ̀ɔ̄ɔ̄ɔ̄ʔɔ̄ʔɔ̄ʔɔ̄ʔ
all is well

12. hɛ̄ kɔ̄ édzɔ̀
the forest is peaceful

13. hɛ̄ kɔ̄ édzɔ̀
the forest is peaceful

14. hɛ̄ kɔ̄ édzɔ̀

15. Q_4 ɛ̀atá ɔ̀kó hɛ́nī ɔ̀dzɛ̀
sir oko how are things at your place?

16. M ȟɛ blɛ̄ɔ̄ɔ̄ɔ̄ é
all is well

17. Q_4 kɔ̀ɔ̀ bíì
how are the forest people?

18. M ȟɛ̄ kɔ̄ édzɔ̀ ée
the forest is peaceful

19. ȟɛ̄ kɔ̄ édzɔ̀ ée
the forest is peaceful

20. kɔ̄ édzɔ̀ ée
the forest is peaceful

21. dzé fɛɛɛ hé dzɔɔɔ é
everything there is peaceful

22. $Q_{(pl)}$ yɔ̄ɔ̄ɔ̄ɔ̄ɔ̄ɔ̄
fine

23. M ʔmpaaoooo
my father
24. ʔmpaaoooo
my father
25. ʰɛ mɛ́ní òkãeɛ́ʔ
what do you say?

26. Q_4 ŋkɛ̀ɛ́ʔ + nɔ́nī hèwɔ̀ mbàá ntáwɔ̀ɔ̀ nyɛ̀ dzí
I said the reason I've come to seek you is that
27. áfī lɛ̀ ɛ́sɛ̀ ní èfɛ̀ɔ̀ mì ákɛ̀ èsà ní nyɛ́ kùsúm nìì
the new year has come and I think the proper
28. ní àbàátsuɛ̀ nōwɔ̄ɔ̄ ésà ní mbátáɔ̀ nìì ní mánù
rites should be performed, so I should under-
29. nìì àmánie nī máná bɔ́nì máfɛ̀è nōwɔ̄ɔ̄ énɛ̀
stand the situation in order to know what to do.
30. hèwɔ̀ wɔ̄bā taó bɔ̀ɛ̀ nɛ̀ɛ̀
This is why we have come seeking you.

31. M ʰɛ̀ nàkàì gbí lɛ̀
yes, it is that time (day).
32. ooooooooo ʰɛ̀ mpaoooo
my father
33. ooo + ʔoooooo
34. + mɛ́nì wɔ̀ bàá yeeeeʔ
what will we eat?

35. Q_4 àkwɛ́lɛ̀ ʔɛ̀ʔɛ̀ʔɛ̀ʔeyɛ̀ʔ èyɛ̀ ódɛ̀ŋ
akwele it, it, it, it is, it is up to you.

36. M ʰɛ́ mpà óò
my father

37. ĥaʔ ˘ ĥámɔ́ntɔ̀nɛ́ɛ̀ + ˘ ˘ nɔ̀ní kɛ̀kɛ̀ ní ĥɛ́mbá
now all that I will say is

38. kɛ́ɛ̀ dzí ʔ + + + + ˘ ˘ nɔ́ní wɔ̀ bɔ̀á yè +
that which we will eat

39. hɛ́mpáóò + ókɛ̀ bɔ̀á ŋmɛ̀ wɔ̀ hìɛ́ ónù
my father you will put it before us.

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